

VZCZCXRO3802
OO RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHKA #1243/01 3371137
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 021137Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7843
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8743
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2483
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9982
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1881
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0963
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1589
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001243

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/01/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES DROP KEY REFORMERS, INCLUDE
GRAFT-TAINTED CANDIDATES FOR PARLIAMENT

DHAKA 00001243 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The two major political parties dropped key reformers and embraced several graft-tainted politicians in their slates of Parliamentary candidates. The lists clearly indicated Bangladesh Nationalist Party Chairwoman Khaleda Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina remained vindictive toward reformers who challenged their authoritarian rule and loyal to allies accused of corruption. While both lists included fresh faces, at least some were proxies for politicians ineligible to run because of corruption convictions. The nominations suggested business as usual for political parties so far resistant to meaningful change of a feudal political system notorious for its corruption and partisan rancor.

TOUGH TIME FOR REFORMERS ...

¶2. (C) The deadline for submitting nominations to run in the December 29 Parliamentary elections was November 30. Although the BNP and its main alliance partner, the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, had yet to agree on seat allocations, they have until the December 11 deadline to come up with a unified ticket. BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan told EmbOff his party likely would agree to supporting nearly 40 Jamaat candidates. The Awami League agreed to support candidates from its major alliance partner, the Jatiya Party led by former military dictator H.M. Ershad, in 50 of Bangladesh's 300 Parliamentary constituencies.

¶3. (SBU) Although new election rules required parties to choose candidates based on local sentiment, BNP Chairperson Zia and Awami League President Hasina had final say over every nomination. Within the BNP, the big losers were former Parliament members who broke with Zia while she was in jail on corruption charges by demanding she end her autocratic rule of the party. Among the high profile reformists denied nominations were former Minister for Education Dr. Osman Farruk and former Minister of Food and Disaster Management Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf. Meanwhile, Hasina denied nominations to several mid-ranking party officials who lost her trust or allied themselves with her Awami League rivals while she faced graft charges. A few of those denied nominations were potential future members of the Presidium,

the Awami League's highest decision-making body.

14. (C) Three prominent BNP reformists received nominations -- Standing Committee Members M. Saifur Rahman and Lt. Gen. (retired) Mahbubur Rahman as well as a leader of a short-lived breakaway reformist group, Maj. (retired) Hafiz Uddin Ahmad. Hafiz told us he expected Zia would marginalize reformist Parliament members after the election. He believed a few reformists were nominated strictly to ensure victory for seats perceived to be vulnerable. (Note: A few other BNP reformists filed nomination papers as independents. The BNP could yet invite them to run under the party umbrella to further strengthen its slate. End note.) In the Awami League, Hasina gave nominations to Presidium members who challenged her leadership, but only one each and not the multiple nominations they had received in previous elections. They too expect to be marginalized within the Awami League after the elections. One prominent reform-minded Awami League official, Organizing Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury, received a nomination despite a deep chill over his once warm relationship with Hasina. He has confided that he did not expect to play a significant role in an Awami League government and expressed great interest in running for Dhaka mayor next year.

...BUT NOT SO TOUGH FOR THE CORRUPT

15. (SBU) Although both parties have paid lip service to cleaning up Bangladesh's notoriously corrupt and violent politics, politicians charged with graft by the 2-year-old Caretaker Government received nominations anyway. Other leading politicians convicted of graft were disqualified

DHAKA 00001243 002.2 OF 002

under the State of Emergency enacted in January 2007. In some cases, however, their wives or other close relatives received nominations in their stead. One of Bangladesh's leading newspapers, the respected Daily Jugantor, on November 30 listed six BNP candidates who were wives of popular politicians convicted of or jailed on graft charges. (Note: One had since withdrawn. End note.) The brother of a convicted BNP extortionist is running as well. (Note: Nazrul Islam Khan claimed relatives of tainted politicians were nominated only because of a lack of other viable candidates. End note.) Particularly galling for the Awami League was the BNPN's nomination of Mohammad Abdus Salam Pintu, who was charged in the notorious August 21, 2004, grenade attack on a Hasina rally.

16. (SBU) The Awami League nominated several convicted and suspected criminals as well. One candidate, for example, was charged in a 2001 attack on Khaleda Zia's motorcade. Another was charged with attempted rape in October 2003. A former Minister of Tourism and Aviation charged with corruption also received a nomination. The son of a former minister reputed to be one of the country's most spectacularly corrupt politicians also made the Awami League list. Still, the Awami League appeared to have nominated fewer politicians tainted by criminal charges and convictions than the BNP.

SILVER LINING HERE AND THERE

17. (SBU) Several top advisers to Zia said they argued strongly against supporting graft-tainted politicians, and indeed some high-profile convicts and graft suspects were not on the lists of nominees. Others may be dropped later in the campaign. Some fresh faces also appeared on both slates, with Bangladesh's leading English-language newspaper, The Daily Star, estimating the number of newcomers at about 40 for the Awami League and roughly half that amount for the BNP. The newspaper applauded the youth of the first-time candidates, reporting many were under 40 years old. At least some of the

new nominees appeared to be solid choices. The BNP, for example, nominated the secretary general of Ain O Shalish Kendro, a highly regarded human-rights non-governmental organization.

COMMENT: IT'S DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

18. (C) Virtually all political observers interviewed by EmbOffs in recent days expressed dismay over the two major parties' candidates, with the BNP in particular coming under harsh criticism. Instead of representing a break with Bangladesh's past dysfunctional democracy, the tickets represent politics as usual that could foreshadow a return to the petty, corrupt and hyper-partisan governance that led to widespread popular support for the Caretaker Government's campaign against graft. "Overall, the people's perception is very bad," said Dhaka University Political Scientist Ataur Rahman. A December 1 editorial in The Daily Star said "the hopes that the nation has entertained about a fresh new start in politics have apparently taken a beating."

19. (C) Zia and Hasina will make many more choices in coming weeks that will shed further light on their interest in reforming Bangladesh's democracy. Among important issues are whether the party leaders will resort to campaign violence, whether the winning party will allow the loser to play a meaningful role in government, and whether the new Parliament will validate the many Caretaker Government ordinances to improve governance. The answers to these questions will go a long way in determining whether this moderate, Muslim-majority nation of 150 million will have a stable political climate inhospitable to the Islamic terrorists who operate throughout South Asia.
PASI